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21. Policy Analysis & Think Tanks In Comparative Perspective

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1. INTRODUCTION

The term *think tank* is one that has been subject to many attempts at definition but there is no settled or agreed meaning. In large part this is due to the significant cross-national differences in the historical development, legal constitution, organizational size and socio-political status of think tanks. The term itself has become problematic as it “is a verbal container which accommodates a heterogeneous set of meanings” (tHart & Vromen, 2008: 135).

In the broader understanding of the term adopted in this chapter, ‘think tanks’ engage in research, analysis and communication for policy development within local communities, national governments and international institutions in both public and private domains (Stone, 2013a, p. 64). This broad view contrasts with the dominant Anglo-American notion of think tanks as organizational manifestations of civil society.

Generally, in the Anglo-American tradition, these organizations are constituted as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). However, in Europe and Asia it is not unusual to find think tanks that are either semi-governmental agencies or quasi-autonomous units within government. This is most particularly the case in China (Abb, 2015; Zhu & Xue, 2007). Additionally, some European political parties have created in-house think tanks in the form of party institutes or foundations such as the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung associated with the Christian Democratic Party in Germany. In parts of North Asia, think tanks are often affiliated with business corporations such as the Mitsubishi Research Institute, a profit-making institute founded in 1970.

Despite this divergence in legal constitution, the roles and functions of think tanks put them at the intersection of academia, public policy and politics where they aim to make connections between policy analysis and policy making. However, there is considerable

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diversity among think tanks in terms of size, ideology, resources, and the quality or quantum of analytic output produced.

Notwithstanding the prosperous, well-known think tanks like RAND, the Brookings Institution, or the Council on Foreign Relations in the United States, the majority of think tanks around the world are relatively small organizations. One of the first extensive analyses of the think tank phenomenon a decade ago noted that most operated with a dozen or so research staff and annual budgets of approximately US\$2–\$3.5 million (Boucher et al., 2004). Today, the situation is not much changed. Capacity-building initiatives such as the Think Fund (financed through the Open Society Foundations network) and the Think Tank Initiative (financed through a partnership initially launched by the John and Flora Hewlett Packard Foundation) note that their grantee organisations are in need of both funding assistance towards core operational costs (rather than project funding) as well as mentoring in research standards and for professionalised policy analysis (see Struyk & Haddaway, 2011; Welner, 2010).

Aside from policy analysis, think tanks also perform a range of ancillary activities that help amplify their policy analysis and sometimes propel their policy products into decision-making circles. The diversity of activities and functions has presented dilemmas in defining think tanks (reflected in the broad description above), and this has been compounded by their dramatic proliferation, hybrid forms, and world-wide spread over the past two decades. Think tank modes of policy analysis range, at one end of the spectrum, from highly scholarly, academic, or technocratic in style, to overtly ideological, partisan, and advocacy-driven, at the other, with vastly different standards of quality throughout.

Think tank's work in applying knowledge to policy problems is complemented by organizational strategies to develop advisory ties to government, industry or the public as brokers of policy analysis. Accordingly, think tank policy analysis is not simply an intellectual exercise that is manifested through expert commentary or policy documents. Instead, policy analysis is also action oriented and reliant on policy entrepreneurship, institution building, and competition in a marketplace of ideas.

This positivist and pluralist conception of think tanks competing nationally and internationally in their advocacy toward governments and international organizations is complicated by understandings of think tank influence that dwell on the longer-term capacity to shape the climate of opinion and develop narratives that structure world views and policy beliefs. Consequently, strategies to directly affect the course of a piece of legislation, or the wording of policy initiatives, must be considered alongside efforts at longer-term, indirect, and subtle influence over discourses of governance.

In this chapter we first discuss the different periods of think tank organizational development and the way these periods relate to different types of policy analysis. We then move to a presentation of the different modes of policy analysis and research methods used by think tanks, followed by a discussion of the way think tanks promote policy analysis to external audiences. The concluding section critically evaluates the utility and influence of think tank policy analysis.

2. Epochs of think tank organizational development

The periods of think tank development from early in the twentieth century parallel the evolution of policy analysis. Three broad stages can be identified: the first group of think tanks that emerged prior to World War II; the second wave of Cold War, peace research and development studies institutes, alongside those with a domestic social and economic policy focus, found primarily in OECD countries; and the worldwide think tank boom from the 1980s continuing to this day (Stone and Denham 2004). Signs of a fourth cycle are appearing and point to mature think tank ecologies. Yet there are also issues of policy analysis saturation in some national contexts. There is a dual dynamic of both heightened competition in tandem with increased collaboration with other policy knowledge producers in the internet era.

i. 20th century think tank innovation

The first think tanks emerged in response to societal and economic problems spawned by urbanization, industrialization and economic growth in English speaking countries, but most prominently in the United States. There are many possible reasons for this heightened degree of development: the US has a strong philanthropic sector, a conducive tax system, political parties that act as electoral coalitions, a pluralist political system, and the division of powers in its federal structure as well as between executive and legislature of the United States (Smith, 1991). The US continues to have a far larger population of think tanks than any other country.

Notwithstanding the numerical supremacy of think tanks in the USA, in general, the dynamics behind the first wave of think tanks development in North America and the British dominions were symptomatic of, and in response to, the growth of state responsibilities and regulatory reach, industrialisation and diversification of economies, the expansion of universities and rising literacy, and the professionalization of public service that facilitated demand for independent policy analysis for the rational improvement of society.

Organization such as the Brookings Institution, the 20th Century Fund, and the Russell Sage Foundation in the United States, and the Fabian Society and National Institute for Economic and Social Research in the UK, are typical. In this early epoch of think tank development, the character of policy analysis had a strong rationalist orientation where 'knowledge spoke to power', reflecting in some degree the limited abilities of government to undertake analysis, or policy perversities that resulted from partisanship, ideological battlefields and corrupt practices.

ii. Post World War II

The post-World War II era brought a more extensive role for the state in social and economic affairs, prompting a second epoch of think tank developments in North America and in European liberal and social democracies. The New Deal and the Great Society period in the United States along with the Korean and Vietnam Wars prompted the development of government contract research institutions. RAND and the Hudson Institute were exemplary of the new breed of think tank, which was increasingly reliant on government contracts

rather than private philanthropy. A number of other institutes, most notably the Urban Institute, acquired substantial input into social policy and analysed American social problems such as the inner city and urban decline, Medicare, or state work-welfare programs.

Similar institutes emerged in other developed countries, often aligned with political parties: all of the major German political parties are loosely associated with research foundations that play some role in shaping policy, but in a more disinterested manner than is the case of Anglo systems. These include the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (Social Democratic Party-aligned), the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (Christian Democratic Union-aligned), the Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung (Christian Social Union-aligned), the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung (aligned with the Greens), Friedrich Naumann Foundation (Free Democratic Party-aligned) and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (aligned with Die Linke). Likewise, the major political parties in The Netherlands are linked with policy research bodies. Other countries such as Italy, Spain and Switzerland as well as most Scandinavian countries grew a healthy population of policy research institutes over the decades until the 1980s.

Many of the think tanks in this second epoch pioneered applications of new statistical techniques, economic modelling and cost-benefit analysis. Policy analysis became more sophisticated and professional. Government demand expanded with the growth of government, but more importantly with the capacity of state officials to absorb and use this kind of analysis. In common with previous epoch, institutes were seen as providing rational knowledge inputs into policy development.

There were also developments in how these policy analysis organizations were organized and structured. In an era defined by the Cold War, superpower rivalries, and Third World issues with regard to international issues, think tanks expanded from general purpose institutes such as the ubiquitous Brookings Institution to reflect a proliferation of foreign policy institutes, centers for the study of security, and development studies institutes. On domestic affairs, depending on the make-up of the host country, other modes of policy analysis specialization emerged, including social policy, race and/or ethnic affairs, and the environment.

With the growing number of policy institutes seeking policy attention as well as funding, observers started talking about a marketplace of ideas. This pluralist perspective was prevalent in the highly competitive US policy ecology (Weidenbaum, 2011). Others, however, depict a 'war of ideas' in which think tanks battle for power and persuasion (Kostić, 2014).

iii. The international diffusion of think tanks

From the 1980s, a world-wide boom of think tanks was apparent. In Anglo-American political systems, think tank communities matured. Whether as a cause or a consequence of the rise of environmental considerations, environmental policy institutes burgeoned. Specialization has evolved on other fronts as well, including women's policy institutes, business ethics think tanks, and centers for democracy promotion.

However, the diffusion of the think tank model is not an inevitable dynamic. The extent of think tank spread has been highly variable. And political culture matters: for instance, it has been suggested that the French “don’t do think tanks” (Williams, 2008, p. 53).² Nevertheless, the think tank boom has been particularly noticeable in Belgium (Fraussen et al., 2016).

In the Anglo-American context, many of the new institutes adopted a more strident ideological stance along with a new organizational propensity for advocacy and publicity to enhance their traditional modes of research dissemination. The rise and influence of so-called New Right think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC and the Adam Smith Institute in London illustrate how free market and conservative think tanks were a key of actor in the paradigm shift from Keynesian policy making toward neoliberal principles of government organization (Denham & Garnett, 2004).

Outside the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the evolution of think tanks occurred later in the twentieth century. In the newly industrialized countries of Asia, rapid economic growth freed resources for policy research while increasing levels of literacy and greater opportunity for university education created new generations of intellectuals. Northeast Asian institutes are relatively numerous but are also more likely to be affiliated with a government ministry or large corporation. There has been a steep increase in the number of Chinese think tanks (Zhufeng, 2009), both inside government as well as more independent bodies (Zhu & Xue, 2007; Abb, 2015).

A number of Latin American countries, such as Argentina, Peru, and Chile, also have a healthy population of research institutes; many are affiliated with universities, and have had a new breath of life with democratization in the region. A similar trend of specialization has occurred: alongside those organizations focusing on national social and economic policies (see Garce & Una, 2010), there are a number of foreign policy think tanks (see Merke & Pauselli, 2015).

Independent, Western-style think tanks in the former Soviet Union appeared after 1989 but the bureaucratic legacy of the old, if impoverished, Soviet-style Academies of Science loomed for a couple of decades. Examples include the Center for Social and Economic Research in Poland and the Center for Liberal Strategies in Bulgaria. As relatively young organizations, with limited resources, the new policy institutes were often over-stretched in their policy focus on the problems of transition. This difficulty is even more pronounced with think tanks in many African countries, on which there is very little scholarly literature (but see Mbadlanyana et al., 2011). In weak and failed states, the presence of think tanks tends to be very limited. Nevertheless, the reality is that think tanks are present in ever greater numbers, with rough estimates in the order of 6,500 world-wide (Abelson and Brooks, 2017).

The international extent of think tank development is reflected in the industry that has evolved around the phenomenon. Specialist consultants and academics cater both to think tanks that need management advice and to their donors who require evaluation of the think

² Others observe that France has developed a sizeable think tank population (see, inter alia, Campbell & Pedersen, 2014).

tank analysis they have funded (Struyk, 2006). Over the past two decades, numerous workshops have been convened by development agencies such as the Department for International Development (DfID) or USAID; NGOs like the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) and Freedom House; and international organizations such as the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the EU on how to launch a think tank or how a think tank can better target the policy system of a country. A number of foundations have initiated grant programs to support think tank development such as the Hewlett Foundation and the Open Society Foundations network. There are practical guides on how to run a think tank (Struyk, 2006) or how to translate complex ideas for policy and public consumption (Mendizabal, 2014); listservs and blogs for the think tank community³; and even a degree program run by the right-wing Atlas Institute, which in some respects may be thought of as a transnational institute. As expected, the policy analysis focus and the methods used in the era of internationalization vary significantly and depend on the specific national and policy context and needs.

iv. The Internet era think tank

Think tanks are an excellent barometer of the transnationalization of policy analysis. The dual dynamic of globalization and regionalization has transformed the research agendas of these organizations. Institutes have been compelled to look beyond local and national matters to address trans-border policy problems. Many think tanks have been at the forefront of public debate, policy analysis and research on the local ramifications of global governance dilemmas concerning climate change, security, migration, financial crises and human rights.

In conjunction with academics in universities, a notable number of think tank researchers are leading commentators on globalization. Their transnational research agendas have been complemented by global dissemination of policy analysis via the Internet.

In the evolving shape of global civil society, think tanks are also prominent players. It is common for think tanks to liaise with like-minded bodies from other countries.

Nevertheless, institutes generally remain committed to the nation-state where they are legally constituted. It is relatively rare to see a genuinely transnational/regional/global think tank. However, the non-partisan Carnegie Endowment for International Affairs (established in 1910) has re-engineered into a federated structure as “the oldest international affairs think tank in America and a unique global network with policy research centers in Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East, and the United States—and soon in India”.⁴ Likewise, the International Crisis Group has been portrayed as a transnational think tank (Kostić, 2014, p. 635) and, by others, as a media-oriented NGO.

Think tank activity within the European Union has been considerable, reflecting the deepening of European integration (Boucher et al., 2004; Missiroli & Ioannides, 2012). Despite differences between think tanks in relation to their specific policy remits, structural

³ For instance, the Evidence Based Policy in Development Network listserv as well as the blog On Think Tanks (<http://onthinktanks.org/about/>).

⁴ Tom Carver, ‘The Global Think Tank’, Catalogue; email dated May 4th 2015.

and membership profiles, and ideological perspectives on European integration, they have common features such as close relations with the European Commission and a research focus on distinctively European issues (Ladi, 2005). The Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) in Brussels is the exemplar of this style. Think tanks have also been key players in European harmonization of national structures through cross-national processes of policy transfer, where they go beyond detached policy analysis to spread certain European standards and benchmarks (Ladi, 2005).

Other regional associations, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the African Union, or the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) have also acted as a magnet for think tank activity. ASEAN in particular has witnessed much informal diplomacy convened by elite and often government-sponsored think tanks that have fed into regional security and economic integration initiatives (Stone, 2013a; Zimmerman, 2015).

However, notwithstanding the pressures for convergence that come with globalization and international best practices, knowledge regimes, of which think tanks are one organizational manifestation, are intimately connected with policy making and (capitalist) production regimes in nationally specific ways (Campbell & Pederson, 2014). In short, policy analytic capacities and modalities of think tanks will inevitably differ from one country to the next.

v. Reprise

In a maturing world-wide industry, think tanks are in a constant state of reinvention. Consequently, the resultant typologies and categories are “far from fixed” (Shaw et al., 2013, p. 450). The boundaries between think tanks and other policy analysis organisations groups are becoming increasingly difficult to discern. Advocacy groups, business associations and other NGOs have their own capacity for policy analytic research. Transparency International and Oxfam are well-known examples. Universities around the world have established institutes and policy centres that mirror, up to a point, the concern to bridge research and policy. This is particularly the case in Anglo-American universities, which are increasingly compelled by government and other funders of their research to demonstrate that they have impact upon, and provide ‘added-value’ for, society and economy. Universities in a number of countries now tread on the policy analytic territory of think tanks.

Yet some argue that the impact of American think tanks over the past forty years has been to ‘drown out’ the voices of academic commentary and has “autonomously produced social scientific knowledge... by fortifying a system of social relations that relegates its producers to the margins of public debate” (Bloch, 2013, p. 649; Medvetz, 2012). In an increasingly competitive field where organizational identities blend and blur, an epistemological move away from studying organizations to studying the organization of policy analysis is prompted.

Think tank practice is not devoted exclusively to desk-based research and policy analysis: some are “think-and-do-tanks” involved in advocacy, technical assistance, and training. Other institutes are informally incorporated into policy implementation or provide

monitoring and evaluation services. In most countries, these organizations strive for media coverage and consequently develop their analysis into digestible formats for public consumptions such as op-eds and ‘talking heads’ for TV or radio commentary. Consequently, the variety of think tanks in existence quite simply defies simple generalization. At the same time, generalization about standards of research and integrity of policy analysis is similarly impossible. Comparative analysis of think tanks is can be further complicated by considerations of regime type where the structures of state monitoring and censorship of (semi-)authoritarian polities restrict the parameters of acceptable inquiry. Quite clearly a government-funded Chinese think tank faces different incentives and pressures than a legally independent and financially autonomous Canadian think tank (see McLevey, 2014) or a financially strapped think tank in the Caucasus (see Buldioski, 2009).

Today there is a wealth of information about, and for, these organizations: league tables and rankings; dedicated prizes and competitions; databases and internet directories, scholarly articles and books; and professional evaluations of the policy analysis proffered by think tanks. Scholarly interest continues to grow and diversify, with new sub fields of investigation, for instance, including foreign policy institutes (see *inter alia*, Abb, 2013; Abelson et al., 2017; Acharya, 2011; Stone, 2013) and, as discussed in the last section, the development over the past decade of new theoretical considerations on think tank influence.

3. Modes of policy analysis and research methods used by think tanks

Depending on the think tank, different modes of policy analysis and research methods are preferred. There are at least five questions in think tank policy analysis production, which we now discuss.

i. What is the character of research?

A common type is the ‘ideological tank’ or ‘advocacy tanks’—organizations that have a clearly specified political or, more broadly, ideological philosophy. As ‘advocacy organizations’, think tanks are driven by normative principles, ideological beliefs, or scholarly and professional standards to broadcast and apply their advice to bring about policy change or reform. In general, the later generations of American, Canadian, British and Australian think tanks have been more advocacy-oriented in order to maintain both media and political attention in the increasingly competitive marketplace of ideas (Misztal, 2012). This may be less apparent in some other OECD contexts but is nevertheless evident. Other examples include the ‘New Right’ think tanks in the UK and the think tanks that are affiliated with political parties in Germany. Such think tanks choose their research topics and design and conduct their research in light of their ideological identity, and explicitly state this in their mission statements. A contemporary manifestation is the conservative-funded climate sceptic think tanks (Jacques et al., 2008).

One of the oldest think tanks of this type is the Friedrich-Ebert–Stiftung Foundation (FES), which was founded in 1925 and is associated with the German Social Democratic Party. The range of topics that it is interested in is clearly linked to its socialist values and includes

educational policy, local government and European policy, but also global policy and development. Their research leans towards a case-study methodology: For example, in relation to international energy and climate change policy, FES produces policy papers with specific policy recommendations enriched with German and international case studies (<http://www.fes.de/de/>).

This approach can be juxtaposed with the non-partisan, neutral or data-driven think tanks like the US National Bureau for Economic Research (NBER), which does economic modelling, and the London-based Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), which specializes in micro-economic research. Both of these think tanks can be described as academic think tanks whose target group is not only policy-makers but also academics and researchers. They provide innovative research and are proud of the quality of the research that they produce. The NBER website states that “twenty-five Nobel Prize winners in Economics and thirteen past chairs of the President's Council of Economic Advisers have been researchers at the NBER” (<http://www.nber.org/>). IFS is host to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Centre for the Microeconomic Analysis of Public Policy, a prestigious research centre attracting the interest of both academia and policy makers (<http://www.ifs.org.uk/>). These institutes focus on micro and macro economic analysis rather than qualitative methods. Quantitative methods and formal models are often seen as more objective, and this is also the case in the world of think tanks and to their audiences. Many other institutes around the world prefer this type of methodology—for example, the Malaysian Institute of Economic Research (MIER), the Indian Council for International Economic Research (ICIER), and the many economics-based institutes in sub-Saharan Africa supported by both the regional Africa Capacity Building Foundation and the Global Development Network.

ii. What is the foci of policy analysis?

The ‘academic’ think tanks such as the IFS described in the previous section can also be described as ‘specialist’ tanks, meaning that their research has a specific thematic focus. Common subjects are foreign policy and specific policy sectors such as the environment. The research that specialist tanks conduct is more in depth since they do not need to cover a variety of diverse topics. This means that they are able to use a mixture of research methods and be innovative in their modes of policy analysis. The Foreign Policy Institute (FPI), a Washington-based think tank affiliated with a university (John Hopkins University) is a good example of a specialized think tank. The FPI publishes the *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, where academic articles using all possible research methods can be found. In the same vein of cutting-edge research, the FPI announces the books of its fellows and affiliated researchers. FPI also publishes policy papers and briefs based on a variety of research methods, with a principal focus on the policy message conveyed (<http://www.fpi.sais-jhu.edu/>).

Many generalist think tanks still exist, however. Most of the ‘advocacy’ and ‘ideological’ tanks, for example the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Foundation discussed in the previous section, are preoccupied with a huge variety of social problems and accordingly make use of a variety of research tools. The same applies to think tanks that aim to target the supra-national level, such as the Brussels-based think tanks that are discussed in the next section. Generalist think tanks aim to cover a broader range of issues, but are still likely to gain a

reputation for their work on specific issues; this is what happened with Bruegel during the Eurozone crisis when Bruegel's researchers were invited to almost all relevant discussions and conferences.

iii. For which governance level is policy analysis produced?

Reflecting on whether the level of governance for which think tanks work affects their policy analysis mode and research methods provides interesting observations. Think tanks could either work at the regional level (for example, the American 'state-tanks') or at the supra-national level (for example, the think-tanks that are based in Brussels and are aiming at the EU).

'State-tanks' which operate at the regional level often have a more focused agenda related to the specific problems of their region, but the issues they are working on are not necessarily parochial and may have a global appeal. Next 10, a California-based think tank, aimed to influence the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference held in Paris and showcase California's pivotal role in climate change policies in the US and globally with its report titled 'California Green Innovation Index'. State tanks use a mixture of quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods depending on the topic under research.

At the supra-national level, the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) is one of the most well-known think tanks in Brussels and conducts research on a variety of topics that are central for the EU, including the Eurozone crisis, migration, TTIP, and capital markets union. Research draws on the state of the art in European studies and, depending on the exact topic, experts from different backgrounds (e.g. economists, lawyers etc) contribute to CEPS's research, bringing their own modes of policy analysis and research methods. An interesting feature is that CEPS is very active in collaborative research since its work focuses on the EU. The European Commission is an important source of funding. In 2015, 23% of its budget derived from European research projects, which by default are collaborative. This influences the type of research that CEPS is involved in. Given CEPS's experience in communicating research to policy makers, quite often its role in the research consortium is the communication of the results.

While the EU context is considered *sui generis* by many, nevertheless, there are a range of other think tank initiatives tackling global policy problems and the new dynamics of transnational administration. For example, Think Tank 20 is a formal network of institutes that have received recognition from the G20, and have some limited input in discussions on global economic governance. The Shangri-La Dialogue is regular summit of defence ministers and defence professionals initiated by a UK-based think tank—the Institute for Strategic Studies—and into which there is extensive input from the ASEAN-Institute of Strategic and International Studies think tank network as well as that of other expert bodies (Zimmerman, 2015). In 2013, the BRICs set up a think tank council. These examples are simply illustrative of the considerable ferment of transnational policy analysis undertaken by think tank consortia (Stone, 2013a).⁵

⁵<http://www.bricsforum.com/2013/03/15/brics-think-tanks-council-set-up/> accessed 15th December 2015.

iv. How is think tank policy analysis operationalized?

The penultimate category is the ‘think and do tanks’—organizations which, apart from their traditional research activities, are active at a more practical level, such as the funding of charity projects. This type of think tanks is closer to non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The research that these organizations conduct is more applied and aims at direct policy results. They often focus on global problems and development issues. The Centre for Global Development (CGD) based in London and Washington is a telling example. In a report on building a think and do tank, CGD researchers present research that produced tangible policy results (MacDonald & Moss, 2014). An example is the work that they produced on impact evaluation, which led to the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) and what they call a narrowing of the evaluation gap. Think and do tanks may use diverse research methodologies and produce innovative work, but are not very much concerned with academic publishing since their priority is a more direct policy result. The downside is that their work may go unnoticed by the academic public policy community.

v. Who produces the research? And is it any good?

A think tank’s reputation is very important. Human capital is the primary asset in producing policy analysis and sustaining the organization’s professional credibility as a repository of policy knowledge. Accordingly, most think tanks seek to ensure that their staff is highly qualified, with most research positions requiring staff to hold a PhD and conform to research protocols of their discipline or profession. Some teach on a part-time basis as adjunct faculty of universities and some think tanks are formally linked with universities. Think tanks also produce human capital in the form of specialized analysts who often move between think tank, university, and government service—with long-term ramifications that indirectly interweave the think tank with government agencies via its former fellows. Nevertheless, due to budgetary constraints, think tanks are often forced to rely on interns who participate in the research process but also in the organization of events. A proliferation in the number of interns may call into question think tanks’ capacity to produce high quality of research.

Some think tank fellows, in a phenomenon known as the ‘revolving door’, have spent careers working with governments or international organizations before bringing their professional experience to the think tank. Other think tank scholars regularly seek appointment to official committees and advisory boards. Usually, staff can legitimately claim knowledge and detailed awareness of the internal workings of government. Consequently, the mix of staff experiences and formal qualifications is important for the organization to establish credibility with political audiences.

Credibility maintenance thus becomes a delicate balancing act for these ‘hybrid’ organisations. They are four footed organisations with “one foot in academia, one foot in journalism, one foot in the market and one foot in politics” (Bloch, 2013, p. 648; Medvetz, 2012). Yet in terms of everyday practice, some think tanks may be more bi-podal or tri-podal. A body like the International Crisis Group might work closer to the media world (Kostic, 2014; Misztal, 2012). By contrast, a number of think tanks in Latin America have been founded or based in universities (Chaufen, 2014), while CIGI in Canada is closely

connected with the Balsillie School at the University of Waterloo. The key point, however, is that these multiple identities and constituencies present resource dependencies and conflicting organizational logics that result from catering for different groups of funders or patrons (McLevey, 2014).

4. Promoting think tank policy analysis to external audiences

One of the most important functions of a think tank is the specialized provision of policy analysis. However, policy analysis comes in a variety of formats and delivery mechanisms. The main targets of think tank analysis are legislatures and executives as well as bureaucrats and politicians at local, national, and international levels of governance, but there are further target communities of other policy actors and opinion-formers in society. To reach these varied audiences, think tanks promote their policy analysis in manifold ways.

i. Think tanks as information interlocutors

As interlocutors between knowledge and power, scholarly work and policy work, think tanks may provide services such as ethics or policy training for civil servants, or organize conferences or seminars. Similarly, they have become useful translators of the abstract modelling and dense theoretical concepts characteristic of contemporary (social) science. For governments concerned with evidence-based policy, think tanks potentially assist a more rational policy process by augmenting in-house research capacities, circumventing time and institutional constraints, and alerting elites to changing policy conditions.

There is a well-known distinction between research ‘on’ policy and research ‘for’ policy. Research on policy is more reflective and academic in style whereas research for policy is about evaluating whether a policy is or will be successful or not. (Burton, 2006, p. 187). Many think tanks do both types of research, with the exact balance between the two contributing to the diversity of policy analysis styles in think tank ecologies already discussed.

The historical image of think tanks as neutral or dispassionate creators or synthesisers of policy knowledge and advice has been subject to significant criticism, as discussed below. Nevertheless, in an era where too much information is bombarding governments and businesses, one critical role of think tanks is to act as editors and provide validation for various sources of information. Think tanks have created a niche as sifters and synthesizers of policy-relevant knowledge (Stone, 2007; ‘tHart & Vromen, 2008). However, this function is very much dependent on the intrinsic quality of their research staff and high standards of intellectual quality. In many parts of the world, the research integrity and ethical standards of inquiry, as well as the wider societal legitimacy of think tanks, remain a concern (*inter alia*, Buldioski, 2009; Medizabal, 2014; Stuyk, 2006).

ii. Think tank communication and marketing

In practice, think tanks no longer communicate their advice and analysis solely through the policy professional domains of seminars, conferences and publications. They publicize their

views in public fora such as television, radio, newspaper commentary and Twitter campaigns via ‘sound bite’ policy analysis. Think tank as well as their experts need to act as policy entrepreneurs—that is, as educators, advocates and networkers. Effective communication to policy audiences is as important to the success of a think tank as the production of high-quality policy analysis.

For the past century, think tanks have been more adept at political communication than universities and NGOs. They located offices close to the centre of power. Indeed, the think tank organisational format was an institutional response to the long-standing dilemma of ‘bridging research and policy’ or promoting evidence-based policy. Today, however, a consistent theme emerging from donors and directors is that “communications—and leveraging social media—are critical if think tanks want to maximize their impact” (CIGI, 2011, p. 8).

Advocacy is often the communication strategy of the ‘outsider’ think tank—one located within civil society or otherwise independent—as it tries to push evidence and analysis into government. However, some think tanks become ‘insiders’ to policy communities. Here, science and policy are difficult to distinguish and the guidelines for validating knowledge are highly contested. In those cases there can be intense struggles over political and epistemic authority, and evidence-based policy may turn into policy-based evidence (see Strassheim & Kettunen, 2014).

iii. Think tank policy networks and partnerships

Think tanks also contribute to governance and institution building by facilitating exchange between government and private actors such as network entrepreneurs. Networks play an important role for think tanks both in embedding them in a relationship with more powerful actors, and in increasing their constituencies, thereby potentially amplifying their impact. However, too close an affinity with government, a political party, or an NGO can seriously undermine a think tank’s authority and legitimacy as an objective (or at least balanced) knowledge provider.

Policy communities and sub-governments are well-understood phenomena of policy making that represent a policy sector or policy issue mode of governance. Policy communities incorporate actors from inside and outside government to facilitate decision-making and joint participation and consensus building around policy implementation. Think tank staff becomes involved in these policy communities through a number of routes—informally, through consultations and personal networking and long-term cultivation of the persons central to the community, and more formally through appointment to advisory bodies. In such circumstances, there is a relationship of trust between a think tank and a government ministry or set of officials; the think tank’s expertise is recognized and as relationships are built, some privileged access to policy venues occurs. For instance, there is a close and long-standing relationship between the Overseas Development Institute in London and the UK Department for International Development (Stone, 2013a).

As conveners of conferences, workshops, executive training seminars and research projects, think tanks invite and embed themselves with business executives, government officials,

and other experts. Such activities provide convivial environs for off-the-record discussions. Indeed, a number of think tanks around the world that enjoy the trust of governments have played a quiet but effective behind-the-scenes role as agents of “track two diplomacy” (Acharya, 2011; Zimmerman, 2015).

iv. Transnational think tanking

Think tank engagements with counterparts in other countries can take multiple forms, including temporary project related partnerships or longer-term networks and associations. Networks provide an infrastructure for global dialogue and research collaboration, and quite often for capacity building. The Open Society Foundation (OSF) founded PASOS, a regional network of Central and Eastern European institutes that has now expanded geographically and is free-standing from the OSF. The Global Development Network is an extensive international federal network primarily of economic research institutes (see Plehwe, 2007 for a critique). This is a natural evolution of the cross-border nature of many contemporary policy problems, and of new sources of demand for policy analysis.

International organizations like the World Bank, European Union (EU), World Trade Organization (WTO) and UNDP are important financiers and consumers of research and policy analysis. They have provided capacity building and training programs throughout the world for local elites to establish new think tanks and policy networks (UNDP, 2003). They also require independent policy analysis and research—not only to support problem definition and outline policy solutions, but also to monitor and evaluate existing policy and provide scholarly legitimization for policy development.

Think tanks have become key actors in a thickening web of global and regional institutions, regulatory activities and policy practices. Global governance structures such as the Global Water Partnership or UNAIDS have emerged in response to the increasing prevalence of global policy problems across national boundaries. These contemporary policy problems provide a structural dynamic for research collaboration, sharing of responsibilities, regularized communication, and expert consultation. Global public policy networks are neo-corporatist arrangements that act alongside international organizations, government officials, business representatives, and stakeholders to a policy area to provide policy analysis. Within these networks, selected think tanks have become useful in building the infrastructure for communication between transnational policy actors—including websites, newsletters, and international meetings—and managing the flow of information coming from numerous sources.

5. The utility and influence of think tank policy analysis

One of the most perplexing questions of think tank analysis, especially in methodological terms, concerns think tank policy influence. As one book asks, *Do Think Tanks Matter?* (Abelson, 2009; see also CIGI, 2011). The rising numbers of these organizations world-wide—no matter how they are defined—would suggest they do matter. But sheer scale does not address the questions of when, how and why they matter, and if they will continue to be of consequence in the longer term.

Notwithstanding their extensive growth, the majority of think tanks do not enjoy automatic political access or regular invitations to contribute to policy processes. Attempting to broker policy analysis to decision-makers does not equate with immediate policy impact on forthcoming legislation or executive thinking. Relatively few think tanks make key contributions to decision-making in local, national, global or regional forums, or exert paradigmatic influence over policy thinking. Instead, to return to the marketplace or battlefield metaphor, it is more apt to view these organizations as one set of sellers of ideas, or analytic brigades, in the larger policy community ecology.

Furthermore, think tank research and reports do not escape challenges or criticism from other knowledge providers based in universities or NGOs or the media. In addition, they may be ignored or patronized at will by governments, corporations, and international organizations. This is more likely to occur as information technology and social media helps unpack policy analysis functions from a specific organizational form.

Think tanks appropriate authority on the basis of their scholarly credentials as quasi-academic organizations focused on the rigorous and professional analysis of policy issues. Many use their presumed 'independent' status as civil society organizations to strengthen their reputation as beholden neither to the interests of the market nor the state. These endowments give think tanks some legitimacy in seeking to intervene with knowledge and advice in policy processes. Think tank league tables and rankings may give an impression of importance, but have been heavily criticised for methodological biases (Abelson and Brooks, 2017).

A 2004 survey of European decision makers, journalists, and academics on the impact of think tanks discovered critical and cautious perceptions of influence: While recognizing the importance of a healthy think tank sector for EU policymaking, many survey respondents criticized think tanks for their lack of impact and relevance; their technocratic and elitist orientation; and their ability to provide added value (Boucher et al., 2004, p. 85). Even think tankers bemoan the limited or lack of influence they exert: for instance at a conference on the theme 'Can think tanks make a difference?', one think tank director said that in an age of 'de-politicization', "big ideas are off the table because politicians don't want to take risks" (CIGI, 2011, p. 8).

Nevertheless, these organizations acquire political credibility by performing services for governments and other policy actors. In short, the sources of demand help explain think tank relevance and utility, if not their direct policy influence. Accordingly, the reality may be that governments or certain political groups employ these organizations as tools to pursue their own interests or to provide intellectual legitimation for pre-determined policy approaches—not that think tanks have an impact on government.

Think tank development is also indicative of the wider politicization of policy analysis. In a few countries, think tanks are a means of career advancement or a stepping stone for the politically ambitious. The revolving door of individuals moving between executive appointment and think tanks, law firms, or universities is a well-known phenomenon

Rather than the policy analysis papers—or published output—having influence, it is the policy analytic capacity—or human capital—that has long-term influence and resonance inside government, and increasingly inside international organizations.

The utility and relevance of think tanks can also rest within society more generally. Some think tanks attract more attention from the media than from government. The capacity to gain funds from foundations, governments, and corporations to undertake policy analysis is an indirect recognition of the value of many institutes. Others value the pluralism of debate that think tanks can bring into public deliberation; this is one rationale behind the think tank capacity-building initiatives of development agencies. In neo-pluralist thinking, independent think tanks are portrayed as creating a more open, participatory and educated populace and represent a counter to the influence of powerful techno-bureaucratic, corporate, and media interests on the policy agenda. Moreover, a more informed, knowledge-based policy process could have a long term, trickle-down effect of ‘enlightening’ decision making (Weiss, 1990).

Power approaches to the role of think tanks in US policymaking have emphasized how think tanks are key components of the power elite where decision-making is concentrated in the hands of a few groups and individuals (Domhoff, 1983; Dye 1978). Those with neo-Marxist sensibilities argued that establishment think tanks—such as the Brookings Institution and the Council on Foreign Relations—are consensus-building organizations constructing the ideology and long-range plans that convert problems of crisis-prone capitalist economies into manageable and de-politicized objects of public policy. Think tanks help form a coherent sense of long-term class interests and maintain hegemonic control through the constant construction and reconstruction of legitimising policy discourses (Bohle & Nuenhöffer, 2005; Desai, 1994; Pautz, 2011). However, these studies address high-profile institutes with solid links to political parties or the corporate sector, but neglect the role of smaller, lesser-known institutes which thrive in much larger numbers than the elite think tanks, and which continue to achieve sustainable funding for alternative policy perspectives (McLevey, 2014; Stone, 2013a).

Many contemporary analysts are sceptical of think tanks’ ability to exert consistent, direct impact on politics (see the essays in Stone & Denham, 2004). Instead, they develop wider and more nuanced understandings of think tank policy influence and social relevance in their roles as agenda-setters who create policy narratives that capture the political and public imagination (see also Fischer, 2003; Wacquant, 2004). Discourse approaches identify how think tanks seek to mould problem definition and the terms of debate (Zimmerman, 2015). The constructivist approach emphasizes inter-subjective knowledge—common understandings and shared identities—as the dynamic for change.

New departures on the study of think tanks focus more upon collectivity than on individual think tanks or particular ideological groupings. On the one hand, work on think tanks as part of an organizational field of resource interdependencies with other policy analysis producers, the media, donors and policy makers draws upon the work of Bourdieu (Medvetz, 2012). A similar approach uses the ‘linked ecologies’ approach (Stone, 2013a). The idea of ‘knowledge regimes’ states most systematically that the influence of think tank policy analysis is very much mediated by both nationally specific institutional

arrangements and the interplay of powerful political and economic interests that fund, sponsor or otherwise select and patronise (Campbell & Pedersen, 2014, pp. 17-18). Think tank policy analysis and its influence will look different from one political-economy to the next. In all these perspectives, it is in the *longue duree* that think tank policy analysis and activity achieves wider social relevance in shaping patterns of governance and either altering or reinforcing policy paradigms.

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